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ABSTRACT

The Virginia Tech Technical Assistance Center is a collaborative effort among the state education agency, local school districts, and Virginia Tech. The center and its two components, the Severe-Profound Technical Assistance Center (TAC) and the Mild-Moderate TAC, are operated under the school's Institute for the Study of Exceptionalities, designed to meet ongoing training and technical assistance needs of people serving Virginia's special needs populations. Students with severe handicaps present special programming challenges for local school divisions. The small size and distribution of the population, a scarcity of teachers, and other service issues must be taken into account. The center provides state of the art programming information to address unique needs in each locality. The Severely Handicapped TAC is operated on the assumption that collaboration among teachers and administrators is vital to services. The first months of field work yielded knowledge about administrators, teachers, and special education in Southwest Virginia that guided the center and provided the framework for its activities. The center continues to develop a network of local consultants and to work in the areas of library development, electronic networking, workshops, community coalition building, and inservice training. (TES)

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Education and the Changing Rural Community: Anticipating the 21st Century

Delivery of Training and Technical Assistance to Rural Local Educational Agencies: The Special Education Technical Assistance Centers at Virginia Tech

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Providing appropriate services to our Nation's special needs populations and their families has been a priority since the early 70's. The revolution in the education of learners with handicaps has resulted in extraordinary changes in the educational service delivery system. Revisions driven by legislative, judicial and administrative mandates have impacted not only on how and where we teach these learners, but also on staff development for those responsible for providing services to learners with handicaps.

It has been said that while legislative, judicial and administrative initiatives were important to the success of the revolution - APPROPRIATE EDUCATION FOR ALL LEARNERS WITH HANDICAPS - there is nothing more important than the availability of trained professionals to fill instructional, support and administrative roles. Fulfilling these personnel needs can be accomplished on two fronts-preservice and inservice. The presentation addresses the needs of professionals in the field who are or may be associated with providing special education and related services to learners in Southwest Virginia, including administrators, special education and regular education teachers, and ancillary/support staff. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the Southwest Virginia technical assistance efforts with emphasis on the specific issues related to the separate components and how they particularly address the primarily rural catchment area.

The Virginia Tech Technical Assistance Center represents a collaborative effort among the state education agency, local education agencies, and Virginia Tech. Responsive to the individual needs of local school divisions within a 36 county/district catchment area, the Center under the direction of the Institute for the Study of Exceptionalities houses two separate components serving specific academic and/or behavioral special needs populations. The Severe/Profound TAC and the Mild/Moderate TAC are designed to build local capacity to meet local needs. The goals of the efforts include facilitating shared responsibility of administrators and teachers in meeting unique program needs of students with special needs. The catchment area includes divisions often geographically remote with compounding problems related to transportation,communication and value structures that may differ from system to system.

We believe that all professionals continue to 'grow' after completing a formal training program. As such they are in need of training and technical assistance to meet their continuing training needs. Research has indicated that without such training and technical assistance efforts educators, particularly those associated with special education, are likely to experience burn-out and leave teaching. These concerns are especially serious in the southwest regions of Virginia where recruitment and retention pose dual hazards for school divisions seeking to provide services to learners with handicaps.

This is a complex task that cannot be achieved alone, particularly in today's limited resource market. The challenge must be met by a team of qualified agencies and representative staff. One viable member of that team is the university. In response to this need Virginia Tech

has established the Institute for the Study of Exceptionalities to serve as a resource for those in the Commonwealth who are charged with the provision of services to special needs populations with an emphasis on those populations being served in the more geographically isolated areas of the Commonwealth-Southwest Virginia. The mission of the Institute is capacity building; providing training and technical assistance based on current research to administrative, support and instructional staff as they design, implement and evaluate services to this population. Our aim is to join forces with these professionals to ensure the availability of a free appropriate education for all of the Commonwealth's exceptional learners. If our goal of appropriate education for all learners within handicaps is to be achieved, then training and technical assistance must be expanded to the more remote areas of a service region. However, it is imperative to design and implement a broadening of effect without reducing services to existing areas and populations.

The SPH and M/M TAC's provide consultative services that include,but are not limited to:

telephone, center-based and on-site consultations with individual students, teachers, classes that may be long term or short term in duration. Long range planning is provided, emphasizing realistic goals with plans for implementation specific to needs of the student and/or region;

a resource library that houses current state of the art materials such as books,videotapes, software with opportunities available for field testing; and

ongoing professional support via local and regional workshops based on requests by local school divisions and needs assessments; newsletters that focus on information and networking; and building of professional pools of resources at local, sub-regional and region levels.

We believe that the amalgamation of the two efforts as a unified Special Education Technical Assistance Center is essential for a number of reasons. Our impressions from our initial operational months support our beliefs, as we will demonstrate. Previously, organized and supported training and technical assistance has been available to professionals responsible for programs serving only severe/profound and pre-school populations in the Commonwealth. Thus, a significant portion of the Commonwealth's special needs population may have been underserved or unserved due to a lack of organized and planned training/technical assistance (T/TA) activities. If our goal for an appropriate education for all learners with handicaps was to be achieved, T/TA activities needed to be expanded. However, it was imperative to design and implement such broadening of effect without reducing services to existing populations. Reduction of existing services would propel us backward to the early 70's.

Our intent has been to continue the development of the concept of a unified Special Education Technical Assistance Center at the Institute. We believe that with a minimum of additional support, consolidated programs are viable to meet the needs of all learners with handicaps.

As will be noted below, we have learned in our brief operational life that while the needs evidenced by professionals vary significantly across populations, many may be filled by simple (not simplistic) modifications or extension of T/TA models. Some instructional approaches for one population when adapted can be used to address the needs of additional learners. Thus, TAC staff employed primarily to serve one group can provide T/TA in other areas. Materials, print/hardware and software, purchased for one group of learners can be used as is or modified to meet the needs of others. Awareness and orientation activities, individual, small and large group conferences can be provided for all school professionals regardless of the targeted population served. Modes of communication, such as a telephone hot-line, newsletters, SpecialNet, can be used with all groups. Finally, and perhaps most important, there is a single point of reference for T/TA in the region. Administrators, teachers and others

serving our handicapped learners are incredibly busy and cannot be asked to search extensively for T/TA. The single point of entry enables us to respond to a broad range of needs. When we cannot fulfill the need within the scope of our center, we search for the appropriate response, rather than the request initiator having to spend valuable time searching.

Before moving to the program description we should reiterate some basic assumptions we operate under in the design and delivery of T/TA activities. First, when providing technical assistance we view the consultant role as being that of a trainer. To the maximum extent possible we want to train the administrator and/or the classroom teacher so that he/she will be able to solve the problem in the future.

Second, we believe that when a T/TA request is made it is critical that we not "point the finger". Program administrators, classroom teachers, all school personnel must be provided a vehicle in which they feel comfortable in expressing a real or perceived need. When, for example, a teacher makes a request we should view that as an opportunity to improve the instructional environment for the learner with handicaps; not that the teacher is incompetent or lacks basic skills.

Third, our experience suggests that for T/TA to be successful it may be necessary to revise school policy or procedure. In other instances, expensive resources may have to be acquired. In both cases there will be a need to involve not only staff but also program administrators. Building principals, program coordinators, central office staff may all be potentially valuable in providing effective and efficient services for programs within their system. In light of this, whenever T/TA is provided, the local administrators are invited to participate in the technical assistance visit.

Fourth, it has become readily apparent that all T/TA cannot be provided by our staff. As such, we become brokers, the entity that links the T/TA request to the provider. To this end, we continue to employ resources from other IHE's as well as consultants from exemplary school-based programs.

Finally, we believe that there is always room for improvement in any program. We monitor and evaluate all activities conducted by project staff and consultants. The Institute staff and the state network of Technical Assistance Centers are a primary sounding board for discussion about revisions in our project based on data from monitoring and evaluation efforts.

The objectives of the Special Education Technical Assistance Centers at Virginia Tech are : (a) to establish an immediate and continuous training and technical assistance capability in our Region: (b) to operate a comprehensive training and technical assistance system which enables staff to identify needs and respond effectively and efficiently; and (c) to design and administer the project in an efficient and effective manner.

The Mild/Moderate TAC addresses the needs of special and regular educators and administrators who are attempting to serve learners in Southwest Virginia with mild/moderate handicaps including those students identified as learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, educably mentally handicapped and speech/language disordered. Technical assistance efforts target those professionals who primarily serve the mild/moderate population and who cannot at present be served by the resources of the Severe/Profoundly Handicapped and Preschool Handicapped Technical Assistance Centers in the Commonwealth.

The M/M TAC has been established to provide assistance in such areas as: (a) development, management, and/or evaluation of programs for the mildly handicapped; (b) mainstreaming and/or least restrictive environment issues for placement (c) liaison strategies for effective communication between regular and special educators; and (d) trouble shooting on

learning and/or behavioral concerns of teachers and others serving identified handicapped learners.

The SPH TAC represents a joint effort of the Institute for the Study of Exceptionalities at Virginia Tech and the Montgomery County Public School Division, providing training and technical assistance to personnel involved in the education of students with severe handicaps. All SPH TAC services are provided free of charge and include assisting in programming for students having autism, hearing impairments, dual sensory impairments (deaf/blind), severe orthopedic impairments, severe/profound mental retardation, and multiple handicaps.

Students with severe handicaps present a special programming challenge for local school divisions. The small, broadly distributed population, scarcity of certified teachers and programs to provide certification, complex problems of individual students make appropriate programming often difficult to implement on a local basis. State of the art programming information is provided within individual localized contexts to address the unique needs of students in each locality.

The SPH TAC is based on the assumption that the collaboration of teachers and administrators is vital in providing appropriate, longitudinal education services to these students. SPH TAC service delivery is driven by individual needs identified by local school divisions and directed by on-going, consumer-based evaluation. The SPH TAC is designed to build each local school division's capacity to meet its own needs in providing quality educational programming for students with severe handicaps.

The initial months of operation focused on start-up activities. This included awareness programs, identification and securing of resources and needs assessments. Our first and most important task was to establish the LEA contact consortium. Introductory letters were sent to all superintendents in the 36 division region informing them of the program and indicating our intention of identifying a contact person in each division. A similar letter was then mailed to all Special Education administrators in the region. Additionally, during this time introductory presentations were made at local regional and state special education meetings.

The following observations represent our "LEARNINGS" from the first months of working in the field. The observations have guided the design of our activities for year two and provide the framework for our unified efforts.

Special education supervisors in Southwest Virginia are a fairly tight-knit, independent group of people. They feel that they have unique needs that are often not understood by administrators or persons outside of their community. In many cases, supervisors have developed creative educational alternatives to meet the unique needs of their community and to maximize use of existing resources. This is especially true in providing programming for the SPH student when there is a paucity of readily accessible information regarding best education practices for these students. Supervisors feel that their SPH programs are not judged with their unique needs and resources in mind. State-funded technical assistance programs in the past have apparently stressed LEA confirmation to outside standards without considerations of local needs and initiatives.

Technical assistance delivered in southwest Virginia involves focused consideration of: (a) the specific population to be served; (b) existing programs for that population; (c) current role of persons with mild/moderate and/or severe/profound handicaps in the local community; (d) each school division's current philosophy regarding education of students with mild/moderate and/or severe/profound handicaps; (e) the LEA *context* within surrounding counties or school divisions; and (f) available community resources for persons with handicaps and their families.

Supervisors in the catchment area seem willing to take proactive rather than reactive roles in improving educational programs for special education students. Bringing current best practices in special education into the context of the students' local community is a viable approach. We believe that taking advantage of the autonomy and resourcefulness of supervisors in our region by: (a) considering their unique circumstances (population, resources, community etc.); (b) crediting them for their achievements to date; (c) considering their long-range goals for their special education programs in general and the SPH programs in particular; and (d) assuming that they *care* about all special needs students and *want* to provide quality instructional programs for them goes, a long way toward bridging the gap between current best practices in special education as described in University programs and services actually being delivered in classrooms. The Technical Assistance Center staff is committed to assisting teachers and administrators in using these practices within their own contexts, setting long-range goals, and seeing the outcome of education for the special education student as being the same as for any student - maximum successful involvement in the mainstream of community life.

Special education teachers, building principals, and special education supervisors need to know what "state of the art" programming for special education students *looks* like, what the outcomes are, and how to "pull it off". Without proper training and support, giving teachers the "tools" of systematic instructional techniques, strategies for implementing community-based instruction and data collection procedures is like handing someone who has never seen a house all the boards, nails and hammers he needs to build one and telling him to get on with it. We are committed in our efforts to address the ethical issues involved in educating all special needs students, and providing teachers with a vision for the future of their students. Creative, appropriate use of instructional "technology" will only happen when teachers buy into the principles underlying functional, community referenced education for all students.

We continue to develop a network of local "experts" throughout our region and use them as TAC consultants, documenting through videotapes exemplary classrooms, programs, or projects ongoing in our area, encouraging teachers and administrators to visit each other's programs, and collecting audio-visual examples of "before and after" success stories in a variety of settings to encourage development of an atmosphere in which our technical assistance efforts would be maximized.

In addition to identifying *what* training/technical assistance is needed to enable school divisions to provide effective programs for special needs students, how that technical assistance is delivered seems to be of importance. Due to the small and uneven population distribution, heavily rural area, and relative isolation of LEA's, effective technical assistance cannot be delivered in a typical center-based fashion. Once LEA's are aware of services that exist, most requests coming into the TAC center itself via phone calls or walk-in consultations are reactive in nature -- asking for assistance in solving a particular problem or acquiring a certain type of material -- i.e., putting out fires. More comprehensive, proactive technical assistance seems to need an outreach oriented format, taking services out to the people who need them. The location of the TAC facility seems important mainly in terms of profile or the facility's identity as a resource, and not as a convenient location for "walk-in trade".

We continue to address the need for handling consultancy requests in a more creative fashion. Development of an expanded consultancy model seems a high priority. "Expanded consultations" would not put "band aids" on difficult problems, but would provide specifically for training of teachers and administrators in solving similar problems in the future. Several outstanding consultants in our state who do not recognize financial gain from consulting through TAC's have indicated to us that they would be more willing to provide services if they felt that those services *made a real difference* in programming for the students involved. Building in mechanisms for follow-up, telephone communication with consultants, provision of relevant resource materials, and connection with appropriate local resources could

maximize TAC consultancy services and give teachers skills at adequate levels to assist others in the future.

Additionally, we believe that library services could also be more effective through an outreach-oriented approach. In addition to providing materials on request, the TAC offers assistance to teachers in using and adapting those materials for use with their students. "Satellite libraries" are being established in areas having particular needs. Providing options for follow-up in use of library materials/equipment is being built into TAC procedures. We hope to encourage the use of "SpecialNet" to provide a way for LEA's to keep up with special equipment purchased by other division and as a vehicle for sharing that provides readily accessible opportunities for teachers to see equipment in use before they buy it. TAC staff could provide assistance to teachers and administrators in using the "SpecialNet" system to receive and share information. Promoting an atmosphere of sharing and linking together of teachers who feel isolated from each other is an initial goal for positive change.

TAC center regional and local workshops are based on specific needs identified by teachers and administrators, are pragmatic in nature, and focus on application of best education practices for special needs students in the local context. Workshops include opportunities, through demonstration or videotapes, for participants to see concepts being presented in application. All workshops include some mechanism for follow-up, i.e., a contact person to call when problems arise as teachers put learned skills into practice, supplementary materials, names of nearby teachers who also attended the workshop. Providing teachers with many localized, intensive workshops, rather than a few large regional ones, and following up large regional workshops with in-services maximizes effectiveness of this type of technical assistance.

The TAC center serves as an important forum for discussion of broad-based issues affecting special education programming in our region and in the state. Problems such as teacher endorsement, in-service training for regular educators relative to students with special needs, integration of students with severe handicaps with their non-handicapped peers, transition and post-school services, integrated community living and family issues are pervasive in nature and should be addressed on a broad scale to provide a context for local action. Bringing together university people, school administrators at state and local levels, teachers and parents to address such issues provides the groundwork for maximizing technical assistance efforts in local school divisions.

It has become apparent that we must establish collaborative arrangements with other agencies which currently provide services to a similar population as served by the TAC. Not only do these agencies provide direct services to clients and their families, but also they have or could have technical assistance systems. To this end, we hope to convene a group of parents to begin to build COMMUNITY COALITIONS which will support the design, delivery and evaluation of service delivery to the target population.

The initial phase of operation has entailed the conduct of a field-based needs assessment of the service system for the identified population. Through a series of large and small group meetings throughout the catchment area a portrayal of the system is beginning to emerge. Our intent is to describe the system, its outcomes for learners and their families, the strategies employed to meet these outcomes, and resources allocated to support program initiatives. This portrayal will then be inspected to identify gaps of weaknesses which can be overcome through T/TA activities. The result of the needs assessment process will be a comprehensive plan to ensure the capacity of local school divisions to meet the needs of all handicapped learners.

Concurrently, we must acknowledge the reality that immediate T/TA needs will surface as the needs assessment unfolds. To this end, project staff are prepared to respond either through the employment of staff expertise or through a brokering system using identified

consultants from school divisions and universities in the region or elsewhere in the Commonwealth in providing the necessary training and technical assistance needs. This unified approach to providing technical assistance to special needs populations provides a much needed vehicle for communication in a catchment area often isolated from wider state efforts due to geographic barriers as well as demographic profiles. The Center is our attempt to provide quality training and technical assistance to primarily rural educators in the southwest region of Virginia. It is our belief that the strengths of our approach can generalize to areas of similar geographic and demographic diversity.